

The Future of the UK

Between Internal and External Divisions

Edited by

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Contents

Foreword	4
Notes on Contributors	6
1. Between Internal and External Divisions	9
Marius Guderjan	
2. The EU Referendum and the Crisis of British Democracy	31
Pauline Schnapper	
3. Loose but not Lost! Four Challenges for the EU in the Aftermath of the British Referendum	42
Sandra Schwindenhammer	
4. European, not British? Scottish Nationalism and the EU Referendum	59
Neil McGarvey and Fraser Stewart	
5. The Future of Scotland in the UK: Does the Remarkable Popularity of the SNP Make Independence Inevitable?	71
Paul Cairney	
6. Reflections from Northern Ireland on the Result of the UK Referendum on EU Membership	82
Paul Carmichael	
7. Moving Towards a Dissolved or Strengthened Union?	102
Arjan H. Schakel	

1. Between Internal and External Divisions

Marius Guderjan

[...] we believe in the Union, the precious, precious bond between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland [...] we believe in a union not just between the nations of the United Kingdom but between all of our citizens – every one of us – whoever we are and wherever we're from.

Theresa May, 7 July 2016

British EU Membership and the External Division

The relationship with the EU has always been uneasy and characterised by conflict since the first two applications of membership in the European Economic Community in 1961 and 1967 that were both vetoed by Charles de Gaulle. When, in 1973, the UK eventually was allowed to join the club, and people confirmed this subsequently in the first nationwide referendum in 1975, Britain signed up for an economic project and not for a political union. Hence, the 'honeymoon' did not last long. The Conservative party and Margaret Thatcher initially supported EU membership, but during the 1980s Euroscepticism grew in her party and subsequently in the

population. During her rule Thatcher became more hostile towards the European Community over disputes about British financial contributions and the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy.

British exceptionalism has been further underlined by opt-outs of major policy areas with every European treaty since Maastricht (except for the Nice Treaty). The UK did not join the Economic and Monetary Union in 1992, Justice and Home Affairs – since the Lisbon Treaty the Area of Freedom and Justice – the Schengen Area in 1997 and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in 2007. Under Tony Blair the British Government adopted a more pro-active and cooperative approach to the EU. However, the UK, Blair was reluctant to promote a strong European outlook to avoid confrontations with the Eurosceptic media.

Even though David Cameron did not mean to take UK out of the EU, unintentionally he has led the UK to the ultimate opt-out. Hence, on the day after the referendum he announced his resignation as Prime Minister with the words 'I think the country requires fresh leadership to take it in this direction'. Looking at his record, until close to the referendum when he negotiated a 'better for the UK' and campaigned for Remain, he had done a good job in steering his country into Brexit.

When Cameron became Tory leader, he urged his party to stop 'banging on about Europe'. But his continuing concessions to the Eurosceptic wing of his party has kept the

issue alive and triggered further demands. In 2009, the Conservative Party withdrew itself from the European People's Party, which isolated the party in the European Parliament and damaged its influence over EU policies. After the Tories came to power in 2010, Government passed the European Act Union 2011, which foresees a nationwide referendum on further transfer of powers and future amendments of European Treaties.

In the same year, Cameron upset the majority of European leaders by vetoing the Fiscal Compact (formally the Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union) in the European Council. In order to respond to the sovereign debt crisis, the Euro-states had to adopt the Fiscal Compact outside the existing treaty framework of the EU. Except for the UK, the Czech Republic and Croatia, which only joined the EU in 2013, all Member States ratified the Fiscal Compact. In his Bloomberg speech in 2013, Cameron claimed: 'I am not a British isolationist. I don't just want a better deal for Britain. I want a better deal for Europe too', but his actions had shown a different picture.

To unite his party and fight off UKIP, Cameron promised to negotiate better terms of EU membership and a referendum on British membership by the end of 2017. After his re-election in 2015, a referendum became unavoidable. Cameron called for a fairer, more flexible and more competitive EU, but, except for limiting immigration, he had been very vague on what kind of reforms he wanted.

Nonetheless, he had to deliver some results from negotiations with the EU that allowed him to campaign for Remain. His position in the referendum, he threatened, would depend on the concessions to Britain. During his diplomatic mission across Europe, European leaders were generally open to provide Cameron with a success that he could sell at home to his Eurosceptic backbenchers and to the people.

In February 2016, Cameron handed a list of four demands to Council President Donald Tusk: a four-year benefit freeze for EU-immigrants; a safeguard from decisions by Euro-insiders; economic competitiveness through cutting red-tape and negotiating new free-trade agreement with third parties; and an opt-out of the commitment to an 'ever closer union' and vetoing powers to national parliaments. Whilst Cameron was overall successful in the last three of his demands, with competitiveness being the least controversial, he was not given any concessions that would undermine the fundamental principle of the free movement of people. The best he got was an 'emergency brake' that restricts access of EU-immigrants to social benefits over a four-year period of time. However, Member States have to prove that the capacity of their welfare system are over-stretched, the European Council needs to decide on this matter in unanimity, and the brake only applies for a maximum of seven years, not 13 as originally demanded.

The deal that Cameron got during the European Summit on 18-19 February did not foresee substantial reforms or hand back powers to the UK. Without a clear vision for reforms that could be supported by all Member States, the concessions were largely symbolic and it had not been clear how relevant they were in practice. The deal was meagre but it allowed Cameron to position himself at the head of the Remain campaign. On 20 February, Government announced the referendum on British EU membership for 23 June. The result of that referendum is well known, across the UK 51.9 per cent voted for Leave and 48.1 per cent for Remain. Cameron's successor Theresa May has announced on 2 October 2016 that the British Government will trigger Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union in March 2017 starting the official negotiations about the terms of Brexit.

The close result in the referendum has revealed a deep division in the British population. This divide is only to a limited extent about the different attitudes towards EU membership and regaining sovereignty. These issues have not been high in electorates priorities. Britain is divided across multiple dimensions – socially, geographically, ethnically and politically. The United Kingdom of 2016 is only united by name.

Socio-Economic and Geographic Divisions

Some commentators have pointed towards a division between outward looking modernists and traditionalists who long to return to a glorified past (Easton 2016), but the underlying social tensions are much deeper and more serious. An analysis of the referendum shows that young, educated and affluent people were by far more in favour for staying in the EU than older and more deprived voters (YouGov 2016). Young people were, however, less likely to enter the poll stations (BBC 2016).

A closer look at the referendum's geography also demonstrates that in England striving cities, like London, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol and Leeds, voted to remain, whereas rural and suburban constituencies opted by a majority for Leave. It is not only the 'left behind' who voted for leave and one can make the case that market towns are particularly affine to conservatism and traditions. And yet, the referendum unravelled the economic cleavages between prosperous city regions and peripheral 'left-behind' places with little prospect of overcoming their desolation. South Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Lancashire are among the poorest areas in North West Europe (Inequality Briefing 2014). Here, the leave vote was particularly high with 75.6 per cent in Boston and 73.6 per cent in South Holland (both Lincolnshire); 69.0 per cent in Doncaster, 68.3 per cent in Barnsley and 67.9 per cent in Rotherham (Yorkshire); 67.5 per cent in Blackpool, 66.6 per cent in Burnley and 66.2 per cent

in Hyndburn (Lancashire). Driving through these districts in the run up to the referendum, you could see the St George flag widely displayed expressing a desire to restore national pride in uncertain times.

While public investments have targeted metropolitan areas, austerity policies have been particular hard for local authorities that rely heavily on public spending. As chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne, focused on strengthening cities likely to generate economic growth. Communities in particular need suffered disproportionately from the cuts of social benefits and the closure of leisure centres, libraries, museums and bus services. As one Leave supporter from Blackpool told the Guardian: 'It was nice to give the metropolitan elite a bit of a kicking. There's more to the UK than just central London.' (Pidd 2016)

The vote differed not only across urban and rural areas, the Southwest vis-à-vis the East and the North, even local communities are split into those who understand globalisation and European integration as an unprecedented opportunity to travel and advance and those lacking the capacities and mobility to enjoy this privilege. The external division, the inward looking mind-set, goes hand in hand with such internal divisions that have been a long time in the making. If you are young, middle class and graduated you were far more likely to support Remain than older members of the working class or the precariat. After the referendum, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

(2016) released a review expressing 'serious concern about the impact of regressive policies on the enjoyment of economic and social rights in the UK [...] the Committee concludes that austerity measures and social security reform breach the UK's international human rights obligations.' Disadvantaged and marginalised peoples, low income families, children, persons with disabilities, minority groups and single parent families are particularly affected by poverty. It is not only people without employment but the 'working poor' who suffer deprivation because the national minimum wage zero-hours contracts do not ensure a 'decent standard of living' (ibid.).

When in 2011 riots took place in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and other cities, the UK Government did not engage in a sensitive debate on the socio-economic causes for the outbreaks, but instead, imposed harsh measures on the rioters. In her first speech as Prime Minister of the UK, Theresa May drew the right conclusion of the out vote by emphasising the need to build a more socially just Union. She recognises that 'if you're born poor you will die on average nine years earlier than others [...] if you're a white working class boy you're less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university [...] You have a job, but you don't always have job security...You can just about manage, but you worry about the cost of living and getting your kids into a good school.' How May and her Government will put these realisations into effective policies remains to be seen. Whilst

she promised to protect worker's rights after Brexit, she also plans to allow the creation of new grammar schools which can choose their students and thereby neglect children from poorer households. The British economy faces tough times, which will make it difficult to invest in public welfare.

Ethnic Divisions

Among the 'left-behind' populist movements, like UKIP, gain ground by providing simple answers to complex questions. Both Nigel Farage's *Leave.EU* and the more moderate *Vote Leave*, supported by Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Gisela Stuart, fought 'to take back control of our country', and primarily control of the borders. Prior to the referendum, limiting immigration had been a top priority for voters (Jordan 2015). The *Leave* campaign nurtured and exploited a hostile climate for immigrants particularly from eastern Europe and the Middle-East, but also for non-white communities that have lived in the UK for generations.

Labour MP Jo Cox who was not only compassionately supporting Remain but also the representative of an ethnically diverse constituency. She stood up for mutual tolerance and was engaged in fighting anti-Muslim attacks, which have risen by about 80 per cent in 2015. Her murder on 16 June 2016 by the right-wing extremist Thomas Mair, who shouted 'Britain First' as he attacked Cox, left many in shock

and led to the suspension of campaigning for two days, but it did not stop the xenophobic sentiment among the Leave campaign. An hour before her death, UKIP leader Nigel Farage launched the infamous *Breaking Point* poster that warned of the stream of Syrian refugees by stating 'we must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders'.

In most cases it may be wrong to accuse Leave voters of xenophobia – older generations of immigrants also support the stop of further intakes. Some areas have experienced a rapidly changing demography and severe economic and cultural challenges since citizens from East European countries became fully eligible to the Free Movement of People in 2004. Except for the UK, Ireland and Sweden, all other Member States temporarily restricted labour market access for new members. The native-immigrant divide is, nonetheless, real and many immigrants feel more aware of their outsider status now. The nasty tone of the Leave camp towards the issue of immigration has encouraged more outspoken xenophobia. Shortly after the referendum through England there have numerous reports of verbal abuse, xenophobic social media commentary, anti-migrant leaflets and a small number of physical attacks on Muslim, black and Asian immigrants. In the first week after the referendum, the police reported 331 hate crimes, five times as many as the weekly average of 63 (Parveen and Sherwood 2016).

Although it is not yet clear how Brexit will affect the status of EU and non-EU immigrants in the UK, limiting immigration is a priority in the Government's negotiation with the EU. If Britain kept access in the Single Market as part of the European Economic Area, like Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, it would have to accept the principle of free movement of people. Various UK ministers, including Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, however, have suggested measures that would discriminate foreign workers in British companies, such as a 'naming and shaming' companies with the highest proportion of non-British staff. The UK has in the past served as a model for multiculturalism, anti-discrimination and integrative policies. This image is under threat, and it will require clear political messages speaking out for ethnic diversity to fight xenophobia and preserve Britain's reputation as a liberal society.

Political Divisions

The vote to leave the EU was driven by internal not by external politics. People who usually stay absent from the polling station took the unique opportunity to 'give the Government a kick', and not only the Government but the political class as a whole. Their vote was guided by anger about elitist politicians, disconnected from their representative, responsible for industrial and welfare policies that put large parts of the working class in precarious

situations. The referendum showed that even Labour cannot rely on its working class support anymore. Both major parties, Conservatives and Labour, share the blame for the distrust in politics and the turn to populist parties with UKIP leading the way.

Pauline Schnapper's chapter on the crisis of British democracy provides more insights into the disenfranchisement of the people with their political leaders and the decline of political trust among the population. She also addresses the effects of disproportional representation through the first-past-the-post election system in the UK Parliament. The mis- or underrepresentation of large social groups has also fostered the division of the Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Supporters of Scottish independence argue that Conservative-led Governments never had the democratic legitimacy to rule over Scotland.

With the EU referendum, the crisis of the Union takes on a new dynamic. Even though you may argue in favour for Scotland being significantly more Europhile than the rest of the UK, or whether the Scottish working classes are more loyal to the Scottish National Party (SNP), Scottish residents still voted predominantly to remain and are now faced with the real chance of being dragged out of the EU by England (and Wales). Whilst Neil McGarvey and Fraser Stewart highlight the difference of referendums on Scottish independence and the EU membership and explain why the Leave campaign had little resonance in Scotland, the

contribution of Paul Cairney elaborates on the prospect for Scotland's future in the Union. In his chapter, Arjan Schakel suggests that Scottish independence is unlikely and a stronger institutionalisation of shared rule would bind the devolved nations into a more stable settlement, instead of them drifting further apart.

The referendum also raised a set of serious issues in Northern Ireland. The probability of an independent Northern Ireland – or even a reintegration into the Republic of Ireland – is not the same as for Scotland. Serious challenges will emerge for the still fragile peace process and the relations between the UK and the Southern and Northern parts of the Irish isle. These are thoroughly discussed in Paul Carmichael's chapter.

In addition to serious issues of devolution and political misrepresentation, it is important to understand that divisions are entrenched in the culture of British politics. The underlying dynamic of Westminster democracy is competition (Sturm 2015, 65) promoting a 'winner takes it all' mentality that lacks in ambition to compromise and an adversarial political culture that is rather country-dividing than country-uniting (King 2001). In this sense, the democratic understanding in British politics is a limited one, based on a top-down view in which governments are decisive not responsive. As Marsh et al. 2003 (312) put it: 'the British political tradition emphasizes the idea that a responsible government is one which is willing and able to take strong, decisive, necessary action, even if that action is opposed by a

majority of the population.’ Unlike consensus-oriented democracies, the UK’s majoritarian system does not provide a protection for minorities. This principle also applies for the EU referendum after which a slight majority of 52 per cent get their will at the expense of 48 per cent of the voters – and others who could or have not voted.

The pluralistic election system produces an adversarial style of debate unable to reconcile different interests and needs in society. All devolved assemblies are elected through a mix of majoritarian and proportional representation that allows smaller parties to establish themselves and requires the devolved executives to cooperate with other parliamentary groups. In the UK Parliament, however, the majority party has no incentive to find consensus with other political forces but is mostly concerned about serving a small share of the population who voted for them. I am not suggesting that this phenomenon is unknown to other countries but, unlike many modern democracies, British politics is still strongly characterised by hoarding power rather than sharing it (King 2001). Hence, a system of government that, for a long time, provided strong leadership through clear parliamentary majorities has become the source of social and political incoherence and instability.

Adversarial politics do not serve well for a reasonable exchange of arguments. The referendum campaign has been a particularly bad example of a nasty political discussion not guided by facts but by exaggerations and lies. One of the

most infamous untruths was printed in large letters on a red campaign bus, claiming that the UK would 'send the EU £350 million a week' that could be used for the National Health Service. Shortly after the referendum leading Leave campaigners distanced themselves from this claim, along with promises to reduce immigration significantly. The mutual accusations of politicians in both camps has caused further damage to the levels of political trust. When the people realise that Brexit is not some miraculous cure to all their problems, and the promises made will not substantialise as expected, their disillusion will manifest or grow further.

It is striking that neither Government nor the Leave side had any plan for the case of Brexit. What good is sovereignty when nobody wants to take responsibility? Cameron, the long-term facilitator of the referendum, resigned, Farage 'wanted his life back', and it is doubtful whether Boris Johnson ever really wanted to leave the EU. Although the Conservative party managed to find a new Prime Minister shortly after Cameron stepped down, the game Boris Johnson and Michael Gove played became obvious when the latter withdrew his support for Johnson's leadership ambitions and stood himself for elections. As Nick Cohen (2016) put it, 'there are liars and then there's Boris Johnson and Michael Gove'; suggesting that both do politics the same way, namely they produce headlines in their former careers as journalists: getting public attention through blunt

statements without caring about the consequences for the people they are meant to represent.

Owen Jones (2014) offers a comprehensive account of elitism in British politics. Cameron and Johnson both went to Eton College, a cradle for future Prime Ministers and the UK's elite. In its privileged, competitive environment, students learn to treat life as a game serving their individualist interests. This may explain why Cameron took a gamble with such a high stake when he gave the British a referendum on EU membership. Johnson, a man who has not shied away from producing false news as a journalist and from insulting politicians from other states, did become Prime Minister but Johnson is now representing Britain as the Foreign Secretary.

At the same time, the internal fight in the Labour party between its socialist wing, behind Jeremy Corbyn, and its right-wing is ongoing and fierce. In a coup attempt shortly after the referendum, two-thirds of Corbyn's shadow cabinet stepped down and three-quarters of Labour MPs refused him their confidence. Instead of holding Government into account and providing orientation in uncertain times, Labour is occupied by its own internal divide. No sign of re-building political trust can be expected from a party in such a desolate shape.

There is presently no party in sight to seriously challenge the Conservatives for power, and it seems unlikely that this will change in the foreseeable future. Even the majoritarian,

bipolar logic of the Westminster democracy is thus temporarily suspended. Without a meaningful opposition no one can hold the Government to account for its actions. It is unlikely that the Government will introduce a new system of proportional representation that undermine its claim to power. Theresa May (7 July 2016) is aware that 'If you're from an ordinary working class family, life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise.' Time will show what policies she will initiate to overcome the cleavage between rulers and the ruled, and if she will act in the interest of a minority or a majority of the UK. The Westminster system does not, however, promote consensus finding and an adversarial political culture does not change overnight.

The inability of UK politicians to make compromises have been an ongoing problem in British relations with the EU, particularly under Conservative Governments. This has undermined the country's role in Europe and has eventually contributed to the external division. It will remain to be seen how Theresa May and her cabinet will manage to negotiate a withdrawal agreement beneficial for the British economy, whilst at the same time pleasing the Eurosceptic forces in her party and in the country. Whereas she modestly supported Remain and may take a pragmatic approach in the discussions to come, Boris Johnson, Foreign Secretary, and David Davies, Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, both supported Leave and may be not as cooperative. Sandra Schwindenhammer's contribution to this book

presents an insightful outlook on the procedures and challenges following a British notification on withdrawal from the EU under Article 50 TEU.

Conclusion

Large parts of the British population and its leaders have never been fully committed to pooling sovereignty and integrating with other Member States beyond economic cooperation. Nonetheless, the reasons that drove so many Brits to vote Leave in the referendum were less about a dissatisfaction with the EU but the expression of socio-economic frustration, scapegoating immigrants and ethnic minorities, deep political distrust and anger towards a political elite that does not represent a high share of society.

The referendum has made these divisions more obvious and triggered a public debate, which will most likely not disappear after the UK has left the EU. On the contrary, austerity measures have already widened the gap between the deprived and the affluent, and immediately after referendum markets responded negatively – the Pound Sterling lost in value and stock prices fell. It is not clear yet how Brexit will impact on trade relations, foreign investments and manufacturers, the UK service industry, research funds for universities and industry, and London's global financial centre, but it is likely that Britain will undergo a 'self-inflicted

recession', or 'DIY recession' in Osborne's words. More expensive imports will cause higher inflation and continuing decline of real incomes. And what about the EU immigrants that have made a net contribution of £25billion (Dustmann and Frattini 2013) to public finances between 2001 and 2011 and helped to keep many public services going, including the NHS? Their loss would mean further economic decline and challenge the UK's welfare systems, and thereby increase social inequalities and tensions.

When, how and at what costs the break of both Unions will come remains to be seen. We now know that the UK Government wants to trigger Article 50 in spring 2017 initiating a two-year negotiation phase after which the UK will cease being a member of the EU. At the moment, it looks like a 'hard Brexit' that favour control of immigration over access to the Single Market – prospects have further devaluated the Pound. Theresa May is also planning to introduce a Great Repeal Bill to remove the 1972 European Communities Act which will 'restore' the UK's sovereignty and 'free it to pass its own laws', both announcement that would also not be reconcilable with many obligations of the Single Market. Whilst the external division seems unstoppable, containing the internal division requires farsighted policies sensible to the various societal needs.

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